



## MEMORANDUM

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TO: Mayor Sulka and Members of Town Council

FROM: Shawn Leininger, AICP, Growth Management Director

RE: Cultural District Designation

DATE: September 8, 2015

CC: Marc Orlando, ICMA-CM, Town Manager

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As you are aware, a group of interested individuals known as the Bluffton Creative Initiative are coordinating the establishment of a Bluffton Cultural District with the State of South Carolina Arts Commission. This memorandum provides background information on this effort as well as a scope and outline of the Cultural Districts Program and status of progress:

**Background:** In June 2014 Act 232 went into effect which authorizes the SC Arts Commission to grant Cultural District designation. The applicant must be a city or town in South Carolina which may designate a municipal department or community partner organization (i.e. arts council, chamber of commerce, historic district, visitor's bureau or other capable body may serve in this capacity) to serve as the contact for the application and to manage the proposed district.

Since January of 2015, Doreen Bauman (Celebrate Bluffton) serving as Co-Chair with Judy McElynn (Maye River Gallery) have been engaged in a grassroots effort to establish a steering committee to begin the process of getting Bluffton designated as a Cultural District. It is required that the steering committee be composed of at least one cultural organization and one organization representing artists and other organizations and individuals that represent the interests of the district. As such, they have engaged a number of community organizations, interested individuals, and Town officials and staff of the interest in establishing a Cultural District and the process to move an application forward. At this time, one organization has not taken the lead on this effort; rather a group of individuals from various organizations have teamed together to form the steering committee.

As part of the 2015 Strategic Plan, Town Council identified as a high priority the development of historic/heritage tourism. Specific action steps include exploring and presenting to Town Council the potential establishment of a Bluffton Cultural District.

**What is a Cultural District?:**

- Is a geographic area with a concentration of cultural facilities, activities and assets;
- Is easily identifiable;
- Serves as center of cultural, artistic and economic activity; and
- As listed by the SC Arts Commission, a cultural district may include uses such as:
  - Galleries;
  - Live performance venues;
  - Theaters;
  - Artist studios;
  - Museums;
  - Arts Centers;
  - Arts Schools;
  - Public art pieces; and
  - Restaurants, banks or parks that make their space regularly available to artists.

**SC Arts Commission Identified Benefits of being designated as a Cultural District:**

- Attract artists and creative entrepreneurs;
- Encourage economic and cultural development;
- Attract tourists;
- Preserve and reuse historic buildings;
- Assistance with branding and marketing from Arts Commission; and
- Create a supportive environment for arts and culture.

**SC Arts Commission statewide goals of the program:**

- Hold up the arts as a means of economic and community development;
- Create a new tool for communities to communicate about and capitalize on existing arts assets;
- Encourage more economic development and opportunities in/through the arts; and,
- Collect data that demonstrates the role of the arts in creating and supporting vibrant communities.

**Other places in South Carolina that have Cultural District Designation:**

- City of Rock Hill
  - Arts Council of York County coordinated the application process.
  - There was no formal agreement between the City and the Arts Council in establishing the district, rather the Arts Council has established a working relationship with the City over the past 25 years in that the City provided several buildings for the Art Council to run entertainment activities and an art center.

- The City provided a supporting role in the application process for the cultural district including:
  - Business license information;
  - Mapping and technical services;
  - The City paid for the reception when they announced the cultural district;
  - Several City employees sit on the Steering Committee for the Cultural District; and
  - Submitted the application as required by State Law.
- Tracking of success of the cultural district includes:
  - Business license increase;
  - Marketing efforts;
  - Public art improvements;
  - Occupancy rates;
  - Employment rates;
  - Property tax collection; and
  - Visitor Tracking.
- Goal was to promote the downtown increasing support for existing businesses and attracting new ones.
- Five or six other municipalities, including the City of Beaufort, are currently discussing and/or preparing an application for designation.

### **Application Process:**

#### **Step 1: Create a Cultural District Steering Committee**

- A steering committee has been established by the Co-Chairs named above and includes representatives from SoBA, SoBA Center for the Arts, several local galleries, local preservation organizations, the Merchant Society & Bluffton Chamber, May River Theater, and a local art professor. Below is the list of specific individuals and their associated organizations
  - John Anderson (Coastal State Bank & OTBMS), Terry Brennan (Pluff Mudd Gallery), Josh Cooke (Corner Perk), Carolyn Coppola (Celebrate Bluffton), Peggy Duncan (la Petite Gallerie), Amiri Farris (The Amiri Studio/SCAD), Charlene Gardner (Four Corners Framing & Gallery), Jennifer Green (May River Theater), Bernie Haag (Filling Station Gallery), Shellie West Hodges (Greater Bluffton Chamber), Donna Huffman (BHPS), Daniel Keefer (WJK Landscape Architects), Judy McElynn (May River Gallery), Nancy McGregor (Palmetto Bluff, Photographer), William Mitchell & Don Bergeron (Calhoun Street Gallery), Mary O'Neill (The Complete Home, OTBMS, Arts & Seafood Festival), Marian Sanders, Sandra Wenig, Murray Sease (SoBA), Dylan Sell (Arts Coordinator, Palmetto Bluff Conservancy), Roberts Vaux (Pepper's Old Town), Chris Shoemaker (May River Excursions), and advisors Suzette Surkamer (South Arts Fdn), Scott Seymour (bfg communications)

**Step 2: Confirm Eligibility**

- The Co-Chairs have contacted the SC Arts Commission County Coordinator, Susan DuPlessis and SC Arts Commission Cultural District Program Director, Rusty Sox to review the program guidelines and understand the goals and requirements.

**Step 3: Site Visit by SC Arts Commission staff**

- A site visit to tour the proposed district and meet key stakeholders with the SC Arts Commission staff occurred June 17<sup>th</sup> and June 18<sup>th</sup>.

**Step 4: Map the District**

- A boundary has been proposed to include all of Old Town to Cahill's on the west, Bluffton Village to the north, Burnt Church Road to the east and the May River to the south. The stakeholder group is in the process of mapping the cultural facilities, public art, and other cultural assets within this boundary. A map and spreadsheet of these resources is required with the application.

**Step 5: Establish a Vision and Craft an Action Plan**

- The steering committee must establish a vision and craft an action plan based on input and support from key partners and stakeholders describing the desired outcomes, goals, and strategies for managing the district. Thus far, a survey has been distributed and a draft list of Outcomes and Goals has been crafted from the responses. Further revisions to this draft and strategies for managing the district are still needed.

**Step 6: Hold Public Hearing and Pass a Resolution**

- Once the map and action plan have been crafted, they will be presented to Town Council for discussion and input. Once finalized, a resolution to adopt the establishment of a Cultural District will be presented to Council for approval.

**Step 7: Submit the Application**

- The application must be submitted by the Town and requires the following items for submission:
  - A brief narrative describing the community, the key characteristics of the area, and the municipality's vision and goals for the area;
  - Map of the proposed district with spreadsheet of resources;
  - An action plan describing the desired outcomes, goals and strategies for management; and,
  - A copy of the approved resolution.

## Step 8: Review and Recommendation

- S.C. Arts Commission staff will review the application materials and make recommendations to the S. C. Arts Commission Board who will make the final decision regarding state designation.

## Step 9: Annual Reporting/Recertification Requirements

- Once designated, annual reporting is required. It must include a narrative describing activities that have occurred within the district and report data that measures the impact and reflects the stated goals of the district.
  - Required Data: Number of Visitors and Change in Building Occupancy. Additional data may include tourism counts, sales tax collections, employment, artist count, and art based business counts.
- Every 5 years, recertification is required to assess the district's impact and continued viability. Districts that demonstrate substantial progress or success at accomplishing goals and demonstrate continued local commitment will be recertified for another 5 years.

## Next Steps:

Step of Process	Responsible Party	Status
1. Form a Team of Stakeholders	Steering Committee	Complete
2. Confirm Eligibility	Steering Committee	Complete
3. Site Visit by SC Art Commission Staff	Steering Committee	Complete
4. Establish a Vision and Craft an Action Plan	Steering Committee	In progress
5. Inventory& Map Cultural Assets	Steering Committee/Town to assist with map	In progress
6. Resolution/Pubic Hearing	Town Council	Future step
7. Submit Application	Town Staff	Future step
8. SC Art Commission Review/Approval	SC Art Commission Staff/Board	Future step
9. Annual Reporting/5-yr Recertification	To be determined	Future step

**Costs to the Town:** Town Staff resources are required in the development, submittal, and designation of a Cultural District. This effort by Staff has been accounted for in the current Strategic Plan. Additionally, depending upon the items set forth in the action plan, there may be actions requiring financial contributions from the Town. As noted previously, Town Council will have the ability to review and approve the action plan as part of the authorizing resolution and application.

**Action Items:**

1. The leadership of the Town needs to decide if there is interest in pursuing the designation and if they want to designate the steering committee as the community partner organization or if they would prefer to designate another organization or municipal department. *(Town Council approval)*
2. The steering committee needs to meet to finalize the items of the action plan and the mapping of the district. *(Town Staff input and assistance with mapping)*
3. Once the application, mapping, and action plan are completed the information is presented to Town Council for review and a resolution presented for adoption. *(Town Council review, comment, and approval)*
4. The application is submitted for review and approval by the S.C. Arts Commission board. *(Town Staff assistance)*
5. Recommend that a MOU be established with an existing organization, a new organization, an alliance of organizations to implement, provide annual reports, and be accountable.